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NSA denies receiving Soviet disinformation

By Bill Gertz
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The National Security Agency has denied suggestions that the Soviet Union could be feeding the U.S. intelligence community false information through satellite intercepts of Soviet telephone conversations, an NSA spokesman said Friday.

"There's an awful lot in there that I would take umbrage with," NSA spokesman Mike Levin said of a Washington Times report that the NSA might be receiving false information from the Soviet Union through communications intercepts.

The National Security Agency is the U.S. government's most secret intelligence collection agency. It uses sophisticated spy satellites and advanced computers for global electronic surveillance.

A former staff member of the Senate Intelligence Committee speculated last week that the integrity of NSA's data could have been compromised by a British spy for the Soviet Union and an intelligence leak about a new spy satellite that appeared in the New York Times in 1979.

In an interview last week, Angelo Codevilla, who left the intelligence committee to become an aide to Sen. Malcolm Wallop, R-Wyo., also blamed bureaucratic divisions in the intelligence community for weakening counterintelligence measures aimed at protecting agencies against deception.

Richard Burt, author of the 1979 newspaper article, revealed that the United States was about to orbit a sophisticated spy satellite that could intercept radio signals from Soviet missile tests. The satellite, the article said, "will not be used for that purpose."

Mr. Burt, now an assistant secretary of state, is expected to be nominated by the President as the next ambassador to West Germany. He was questioned about the leak in Senate confirmation hearings two years ago, but declined to provide details, citing First Amendment protections. Mr. Codevilla characterized the disclosure as the most serious media leak he had ever seen.

Revelations about the spy satellite — code-named Chalet — combined with transcripts of Soviet telephone conversations supplied to the Soviets by convicted British spy Geoffrey Prime, has led critics to suggest that the Soviets might be feeding the NSA sophisticated "disinformation," Mr. Codevilla charged.

Before he was uncovered, Mr. Prime worked for the British equivalent of the NSA at a facility in Cheltenham, England.

The NSA would not comment on the Prime case or the existence of the spy satellite.

Mr. Levin defended the NSA's intelligence collection and analysis procedures, saying intelligence data is provided to many other U.S. government agencies.

"We're not responsible for the final analysis," Mr. Levin said. "The all-source analysis is done elsewhere." The NSA's headquarters at Fort Meade, Md., is believed to house computers 10 years ahead of the most sophisticated commercial-grade systems.

He also denied the implication that NSA counterintelligence against Soviet deception is inadequate.

"We're constantly aware of the possibility that there could be a foreign attempt to deceive us," Mr. Levin said. There are continuous "communitywide" efforts among U.S. intelligence agencies to detect disinformation, he said.